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REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL ON THE SITUATION IN TAJIKISTAN

I. INTRODUCTION

1. The present report is submitted pursuant to Security Council resolution 1089 (1996) of 13 December 1996. It brings up to date the record of developments in Tajikistan and of the activities of the United Nations Mission of Observers in Tajikistan (UNMOT), as well as the activities of my Special Representative for Tajikistan, since my progress report of 21 January 1997 (S/1997/56).

II. DEVELOPMENTS IN TAJIKISTAN

2. The situation in the Karategin Valley and Tavildara sector, which was characterized by tense calm at the time of my previous report, eased further as a result of the joint efforts of high-level Government and opposition representatives in the region to ensure the implementation of the Khusdeh ceasefire accord. The Government representatives were led by Mr. Amirkul Azimov, Secretary of the National Security Council, and the opposition representatives by Mr. Davlat Usmon, Chief of Staff of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). They were supported by the Joint Commission and UNMOT. The ceasefire between the Government and UTO has generally held.

3. In mid-January, responding to a request by both Government and opposition to deploy additional teams in the area, UNMOT carried out a number of patrols between Dushanbe and Garm to confirm the security guarantees it had received from both parties for free and unimpeded movement along that road. Having encountered no obstacles, UNMOT prepared for an initial deployment to Komsomolabad and Childara on 7 February.

4. On 3 February, however, five UNMOT personnel (three military observers from Austria, Switzerland and Ukraine, respectively, a Swiss medical doctor and a Tajik interpreter), en route from Garm to Dushanbe for the medical evacuation of a military observer, were stopped near Obigarm and taken hostage by the same armed group that was responsible for abducting 23 persons on 20 December. The

group was commanded by Bakhrom Sodirov, brother of the group's leader Rizvon. The hostages were taken to a camp at Kalainav, 5 kilometres west of Obigarm. The group demanded the return to Tajikistan of Rizvon Sodirov from northern Afghanistan, together with a number of his fighters. The latter demand had already been made in December but had not been met.

5. On 5 February the same group took an additional seven persons hostage: one representative of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) together with her interpreter, and five journalists, three of them nationals of the Russian Federation. The next morning, four staff of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were taken hostage with their vehicles in Dushanbe in broad daylight. On 7 February, the Tajik Minister for Security, Mr. Saidamir Zukhurov, was also taken hostage while trying to negotiate the release of the others.

6. The Government of Tajikistan took the lead in efforts to resolve the hostage crisis. President Rakhmonov, who was personally involved in those efforts, acted in close consultation with UNMOT and with the Government of the Russian Federation. Afghan commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who controls the area in northern Afghanistan where the Sodirov group's fighters were located, visited Dushanbe and rendered valuable assistance. All involved agreed that the safe return of the hostages must have the highest priority and that this must be achieved by peaceful means.

7. On 7 February, the two ICRC personnel were released and, on 11 February, the sick UNMOT military observer was released. Meanwhile, on 8 February, Rizvon Sodirov was brought to his brother's camp to obtain the immediate release of the hostages, after which he was to return to Afghanistan. However, this did not happen. Rizvon Sodirov remained with his brother, and reaffirmed the demand for the transfer of his fighters from Afghanistan; specifically, he demanded that 40 of them be brought, each carrying equipment for two. Since the fulfilment of this demand would have strengthened a group that already was able to interfere with movement on the main road between Dushanbe and Garm, and this affected not only the Government but also the opposition, President Rakhmonov consulted Mr. Abdullo Nuri, leader of UTO. Mr. Nuri agreed that the Government had no alternative but to meet the Sodirov group's demand and readily supported this course of action.

8. As negotiations continued and arrangements were being made for the transfer of the fighters from Afghanistan, one of the captured journalists reported from the camp on 13 February that one of the hostages, a United Nations military observer, had been shot and killed. This report, made in good faith on the basis of events in the camp and assertions by the captors, subsequently turned out to be false.

9. The 40 fighters were assembled in Taloqan, northern Afghanistan, with the help of commander Ahmad Shah Massoud. However, the Government wished to transport the fighters separately from their arms, and in the process of disarmament there was a fire fight between the Sodirov group and Massoud's forces, in which seven of Rizvon's men were killed or wounded. The rest were flown to Tajikistan.

10. The modalities for the exchange of the hostages for the fighters were worked out in telephone contacts between Bakhrom Sodirov and Mr. Vitaly Ignatenko, Deputy Prime Minister of the Russian Federation. Beginning on 14 February the hostages were released in three stages: two on 14 February with the arrival of the Sodirov fighters from Afghanistan to Obigarm; five on 16 February with their delivery to Bakhrom Sodirov's camp; and the last six on 17 February, after further, lengthy negotiations between President Rakhmonov and members of the group. The hostages were in reasonably good condition, although they all had clearly gone through a harrowing experience, and some had been beaten and abused.

11. Following the release of all the hostages, Government and opposition forces reportedly attacked the Sodirov group but their offensive appears not yet to have yielded a decisive result. Meanwhile, on 18 February, only one day after the release of the last hostages, seven persons, five of Russian origin, were assassinated in Dushanbe. I am informed that the Tajik authorities have arrested five persons, who are suspected on the basis of evidence to be responsible for those as well as other killings. Since then, UNMOT has received a warning from an authoritative source that, in order to obtain the release of the five, elements within UTO might resort to taking United Nations personnel hostage.

12. In the light of these developments, I authorized on 8 February the suspension of all United Nations activities in the country, and in two stages the relocation to Uzbekistan of all United Nations personnel in Tajikistan, except for a small UNMOT team in Dushanbe and a civilian liaison office in Khujand. The liaison officer in Taloqan was also withdrawn because of the presence of members of the Sodirov group in that area. In this connection, the military strength of UNMOT has been temporarily reduced through the non-replacement of military observers whose tour of duty had come to an end. At the beginning of March, UNMOT's overall strength was 82, including 28 military observers from Austria (3), Bangladesh (2), Bulgaria (3), Denmark (3), Jordan (3), Poland (2), Switzerland (5), Ukraine (3) and Uruguay (4), and 54 civilian staff of whom 20 were recruited internationally. Mr. Gerd Dietrich Merrem continued as my Special Representative for Tajikistan, and Colonel Jan Andersen of Denmark has served as Acting Chief Military Observer since the departure of Brigadier-General Hasan Abaza of Jordan at the end of his tour of duty on 31 December 1996. Brigadier-General Boleslaw Izydorcyk of Poland will arrive in Tajikistan shortly to take over as Chief Military Observer. At the time of reporting, 22 military observers and 10 civilian staff had been relocated to Uzbekistan.

III. NEGOTIATING PROCESS

13. Following the round of inter-Tajik talks in January (see S/1997/56), my Special Representative continued his contacts with both sides, as well as with representatives of observer countries, in an effort to bridge the gap on certain outstanding political issues and to advance preparations for the next round of talks on military issues. At the invitation of the Government of the Russian Federation, that round began in Moscow on 26 February.

14. As a result of the progress achieved in the negotiations in recent months, a number of Tajik groups, who do not feel represented by either the Government or UTO, have been in touch with UNMOT expressing their desire to be included in the political process. This would be primarily up to the parties to the inter-Tajik talks, but the United Nations has encouraged them to associate relevant groups with the talks, whether as members of their respective delegations or in some other form. The United Nations has maintained that the process of national reconciliation is meant to result in conditions in which all Tajik parties will be able to participate freely and on equal footing. UNMOT has reported, however, that certain armed groups appear to be opposed to the process of national reconciliation altogether.

15. Prior to the Moscow round of talks, President Rakhmonov and Mr. Nuri met on 20 and 21 February in Mashhad (Islamic Republic of Iran) to deal with outstanding issues from the Tehran round. They reached agreement on the Charter of the Commission on National Reconciliation and on an additional protocol concerning the distribution of senior government posts, and also issued a joint communiqué deploring acts of terrorism (S/1997/169, annexes I-III).

16. On 26 February, my Special Representative opened the Moscow round of inter-Tajik talks in the presence of representatives from the observer countries and organizations. The Government's delegation was led by Foreign Minister Talbak Nazarov, and the UTO delegation by Mr. Akbar Turajonzodah, First Deputy Chairman of UTO. Both sides presented working papers on military issues, that is, the reform of the government power structures (armed forces, police, security) and the disarmament and reintegration of the UTO forces into those structures or civilian life. The talks began in a business-like manner and possible compromises could be discerned on a number of issues. However, they proceeded under the shadow of the possible suspension of the talks by the delegation of UTO, owing to the arrest of five opposition members by the Government (see para. 11 above). On 3 March, the talks were interrupted for two days in order to allow a member of the UTO delegation to travel to Dushanbe and visit the detainees. The Government also allowed ICRC and UNMOT access to the detainees.

IV. FINANCIAL ASPECTS

17. The General Assembly, by its resolution 50/238 of 7 June 1996, appropriated $7,478,900 gross for the maintenance of the Mission for the period from 1 July 1996 to 30 June 1997. Therefore, should the Security Council decide to extend the mandate of UNMOT beyond 15 March 1997, the cost of maintaining the Mission is estimated at $623,242 gross per month, assuming continuance of its existing strength and responsibilities.

18. As at 28 February 1997, unpaid assessed contributions to the special account for UNMOT from the inception of the Mission to 15 March 1997 amounted to $2,430,119, which represents some 12 per cent of the assessment of the Mission. The unpaid assessed contributions for all peacekeeping operations amounted to $1.9 billion.

V. OBSERVATIONS

19. The documents agreed at Mashhad add to the growing list of substantive agreements reached in the last two and a half months, that is, the Khusdeh protocol of 11 December 1996 on the settlement of the military and political situation in the areas of confrontation; the Moscow agreement and protocol of 23 December 1996 concerning the establishment of a Commission on National Reconciliation; and the Tehran protocol of 13 February 1997 on refugees. The inter-Tajik talks in Moscow, temporarily suspended, are another positive sign and I shall keep the Council informed of their progress. These are significant steps on the difficult path from armed conflict to normal peaceful political competition. As a result, the negotiating process, propelled forward by the decisive personal involvement of President Rakhmonov and UTO leader Nuri, has acquired a strong momentum. I continue to believe that this effort deserves the international community's vigorous support.

20. At the same time, I am profoundly disturbed at the threat to the personnel of the United Nations as they are trying, in the face of great difficulty, to provide such support. Important as their objectives are, I cannot in good conscience let them return to business as usual unless there are reasonable assurances that they will be safe. I have therefore decided, so long as the situation in Tajikistan continues in a state of flux and international personnel are at particular risk, to maintain for the time being the suspension of United Nations activities in Tajikistan, except for a limited UNMOT presence. This decision remains subject to continuous monitoring and reassessment of the situation and the institution of further, more rigorous security measures by the Government of Tajikistan.

21. In the circumstances, I recommend that the Security Council extend the mandate of UNMOT for a period of three months only, until 15 June 1997, on the understanding that I shall be keeping the Council informed of any significant developments.

22. I take this opportunity to express my appreciation to the Governments of Tajikistan and the Russian Federation and all others involved for their efforts in obtaining the release of the hostages. I should also like to thank the countries contributing military personnel to UNMOT for their steadfast support, and the Governments of Switzerland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland for their quick and effective help.

23. Finally, I should like to pay tribute to my Special Representative and the men and women serving with him in UNMOT. The manner in which they have conducted themselves during the recent, most trying, period are a source of satisfaction and pride for the United Nations.